



Bush At War

by Bob Woodward

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Take-Aways

- At the moment of the first airplane attack, the director of the CIA was having breakfast with a former senator who worried that he was obsessing over bin Laden.
- Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was in the Pentagon and felt the plane's impact.
- President Bush was warned that an aircraft could take off from National Airport and strike the White House with only 40 seconds warning.
- The President's first instructions to the Secret Service were to guard his family.
- The CIA director wanted to evacuate all personnel from CIA headquarters, but operational officers persuaded him to allow them to stay at their posts.
- The first CIA operative to infiltrate Afghanistan carried a suitcase with \$3 million.
- American officials were surprised when Pakistan allied itself with the U.S.
- Afghan tribal leaders let bin Laden slip into Pakistan during the battle of Tora Bora.
- Initial U.S. aerial attacks were delayed by the need to establish combat search and rescue teams to aid downed pilots.
- Rumsfeld argued that the FBI and the Justice Department should focus primarily on prevention of terrorism, rather than its legal prosecution.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall

9

Applicability

5

Innovation

10

Style

10

Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn what happened inside the White House and at the highest levels of U.S. government in the three months following the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks.

Recommendation

This detailed account sometimes reads with the inside perspective of a Tom Clancy thriller. Famed Watergate reporter Bob Woodward's "fly on the wall" story relies on detailed accounts from excellent sources who were in the room when key decisions were made. This exposition lives up to his reputation, and even promotes it to another level — if there is one. He takes us inside the White House bunker, Camp David and the halls of political power. Sometimes you'll think you're reading yesterday's headlines, but the story is more interesting when Woodward tells it. His narrative line is strong and you never feel that he is pandering to an action-film audience. This volume's most important contribution is its colorful portrayal of the key decision makers and its insight into how things really worked in Washington at the nation's most critical moment. *getAbstract.com* highly recommends this book to anyone yearning for a deeper insight about the World Trade Center attacks and their continuing aftermath.

Abstract

Shock

The most serious moment a nation can face is when its leaders decide to go to war. For the George W. Bush administration, the events that led to war occurred on Sept. 11, 2001.

Perhaps no one understood the cost of war better than George Tenet. As long time director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), he was well versed in political Armageddons. Tenet knew that the business of putting intelligence officers in the field to gather human-sourced intelligence (HUMINT) as opposed to intelligence gathered remotely through electronic signals (SIGINT) had fallen into a state of disrepair that had left the U.S. vulnerable to surprise attack. The nadir came in the 1990s; at one point, only 12 individuals were being taught to gather human intelligence. During the Clinton administration, Tenet increased that number tenfold to restore the country's ability to conduct intelligence operations.

The morning of Sept. 11, Tenet was enjoying breakfast at the St. Regis Hotel, three blocks north of the White House, with his political mentor, former Sen. David L. Boren (D.-Okla.). When Boren asked what international threats he saw, Tenet replied, "Bin Laden." The CIA had received so many electronic intercepts suggesting some impending action from Bin Laden's terrorists that the nation's intelligence apparatus had been placed on top alert. After two years of such discussions, Boren was worried that Tenet might be developing an unhealthy, single focus on the creator of al Qaeda. Then, Tenet's bodyguards suddenly bolted to their table. "Mr. Director," the chief security officer said, "There's a serious problem. The World Trade tower has been attacked."

The officer handed Tenet a cell phone. He called CIA headquarters, received the details and ordered key staffers to meet him in 20 minutes. As he rushed back, Tenet wondered if the incident had anything to do with Zacarias Moussaoui, the French-Moroccan whom the FBI had recently detained in Minnesota after he acted suspiciously at a flight school.

"Powell, for one, saw that Bush was tired of rhetoric. The president wanted to kill someone."

"Bush remembers exactly what he was thinking: 'They had declared war on us, and I made up my mind at that moment that we were going to war.'"

“The decision to move Cheney was the clearest indication of how seriously they were taking the threats of another attack.”

“The former president also told his son, the most important thing you’ll do as president every day is get your intelligence briefing.”

“In his first months as Secretary of State, Powell had never really closed the personal loop with Bush, never established a comfort level — the natural, at-ease state of closeness that both had with others.”

All around the nation’s capital, the bureaucratic wheels that ordinarily spun at the speed of inertia were revving up in response to a clarion wake-up call. Reports came in at a furious pace, suggesting that other key buildings were vulnerable and might be attacked, including the White House, the Capitol and CIA headquarters itself. In response, Tenet ordered everyone to evacuate the CIA building in Langley, Virginia. This included even the key personnel operating the Counter Terrorism Center (CTC), the anti-terror nexus that coordinated the agency’s response to sudden events and threats.

Cofer Black, 52, a covert operator who had contributed to the 1994 apprehension of Carlos the Jackal, the most notorious pre-Bin Laden international terrorist, dissented. Black respectfully informed Tenet that he had personnel working the computers who could not be relieved of their duties in order to evacuate. Tenet objected that those on watch at the Global Response Center would be at risk. “We have to get those people out,” he said.

“No, sir, we’re going to have to leave them there because they have a key function to play in a crisis like this. This is exactly why we have the Global Response Center.”

“Well, they could die.”

“Sir, then they’re just going to have to die.”

Tenet paused, reconsidered, and after an agonizing period replied, “You’re absolutely right.” Allowing lives to hang by a thread meant that Tenet, and later the entire administration, realized the rules had changed. Lives would be endangered and lost. Such was the price of war.

President Bush

President George W. Bush had a wake-up call of his own. He was reading to second graders at an elementary school in Sarasota, Florida, when an aide informed him that a jet airliner had just hit the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Not long after, he received another message, “A second plane hit the second tower. America is under attack.” That moment — the President’s hands folded in his lap, his head canted to catch the words spoken to him and his face taking on a distant expression — is engraved in history.

The President spoke briefly to the media and then raced in his motorcade to the Sarasota Bradenton International Airport to clamber onto Air Force One. In his first order to the Secret Service, he told them to check on the welfare of his wife and daughters. The departure of Air Force One wasn’t normal. The aircraft accelerated sharply down the runway and almost stood on its tail as it climbed steeply. In one moment, every where, the definition of normal had changed. At 9:39 a.m., American Airlines Flight 77 careened into the Pentagon.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was in the Pentagon when the plane struck. He felt the building shudder. After hurrying out to inspect the damage and help with the rescue effort, Rumsfeld rushed to the Pentagon war room. It was filled with smoke, so the team had to relocate to another room. Staffers urged Rumsfeld to leave, but he kept working, criticizing the sketchy, dated quality of the war plans for action against Afghanistan.

The National Security Council

After Air Force One took a circuitous route to evade threats, Bush returned to the White House. He was told that an airliner taking off from National Airport could be steered into the White House in 40 seconds. “I’m in the Lord’s hands,” Bush replied, refusing to go on the run to protect his personal safety. Again, the calculus of normalcy had changed.

“Attorney General John D. Ashcroft interrupted. ‘Let’s stop the discussion right here,’ he said. ‘The chief mission of U.S. law enforcement,’ he added, ‘is to stop another attack and apprehend any accomplices or terrorists before they hit us again. If we can’t bring them to trial, so be it.’”

“Bush liked to open every cabinet meeting with a prayer, and he had asked Rumsfeld to prepare one for this gathering. Among the things Rumsfeld prayed for was the ‘patience to measure our lust for action.’”

“Bush was aware of the monumental communications problem he and the administration faced. Sept. 11 was not only the deadliest attack on the American homeland, surpassing Pearl Harbor in body count, but the most photographed and filmed violent assault in history.”

After Bush spoke to the public, the National Security Council briefed him on recommended courses of action. The FBI Director discussed the investigation into the attackers’ identities and what, legally, could be done about them. Attorney General John D. Ashcroft interrupted, insisting that the FBI should focus on preventing another attack, not prosecuting the terrorists — a major shift. Secretary of State Colin Powell reported that the State Department was ready to convey the President’s “You’re either with us or against us” message to Pakistan and the Taliban. Bush then turned to Rumsfeld, asking what military action could be taken immediately. “Very little, effectively,” Rumsfeld replied.

Rumsfeld was having trouble even getting military plans onto his desk. General Tommy Franks, the commander in chief (CINC) of U.S. forces in South Asia and the Middle East, had told him it would take months to draw up plans for a major assault on Afghanistan. “You don’t have months,” Rumsfeld replied, telling Franks to think in terms of days or weeks.

Pakistan

Powell soon focused on Pakistan. It could either be a key ally or a hindrance. A year after the U.S. had imposed sanctions on the country for conducting a nuclear test, General Pervez Musharraf had come to power in a bloodless coup. Since then, relations between the two countries had been chilly. Powell and Bush made a list of seven demands that would clarify which way Musharraf would go on the anti-Taliban initiative. One was that Pakistan break relations with the Taliban and end its support, even though the Taliban were largely a creation of Pakistani intelligence and military apparatus. Powell followed up on delivery of the demands with a personal call to Musharraf. As one general to another, he explained, America needed an ally fighting to protect her flank. America would not accept Pakistan’s refusal to help, he said. To Powell’s surprise, Musharraf agreed to support the U.S. without exception. Without a single explosion, America had won its first battle against bin Laden.

Camp David

On Sept. 16, the day after he met with Bush and his other advisors at Camp David, the President’s rural retreat, Tenet wrote a message to his colleagues at the CIA: “There can be no bureaucratic impediments to success. All the rules have changed. There must be an absolute and full sharing of information, ideas and capabilities. We do not have time to hold meetings or fix problems — fix them quickly and smartly. Each person must assume an unprecedented degree of personal responsibility. We must all be passionate and driven — but not breathless. We must stay cool. Together we will win this war and make our President and the American people proud. We will win this war on behalf of our fallen and injured brothers and sisters in New York and Washington and their families.”

The Three Million Dollar Man

At 4 a.m. Washington time on Sept. 26, a CIA operative named “Gary” rode a Russian-made M-17 helicopter to northeastern Afghanistan. The large metal suitcase between his legs contained \$3 million in nonsequential \$100 bills — the first wave effort to buy covert friends. On Sept. 27, he put a cool \$1 million on the table in front of General Mohammed Fahim, leader of the Northern Alliance that opposed the Taliban. Fahim had about 10,000 poorly equipped fighters. Gary told Fahim to use the money as he wanted. The CIA would soon give Gary another \$10 million to spread around. The message was loud and clear: Washington was deadly serious.

By Sept. 26, the CIA had sent in its first paramilitary teams and was deploying small UAV drones for surveillance. But sending bombers and fighters over hostile

“The president told them they needed to find a way to show visible progress in the war on terror, on their terms.”

“But it was not clear what might happen in the end with Iraq, whether Bush was headed for triumph or disaster or something in between.”

territory without establishing a base for combat search and rescue (CSAR) was akin to sending pilots on suicide missions. Adequate CSAR coverage was seriously lacking in Afghanistan, even with Pakistani help. However, radar-evading B-2 Stealth bombers could be deployed from Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri, but it would take them 15 hours to fly to their targets. “Let them go,” the President ordered on October 6. At 1 p.m. the next day, Bush told the nation, “On my orders the United States military has begun strikes against al Qaeda terrorist training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.”

Tora Bora

With help from the Northern Alliance, the U.S. military’s pinpoint aerial bombing campaign and pervasive paramilitary ground efforts advanced steadily, focusing on Tora Bora — about 15,000 feet up in the White Mountains. Many al Qaeda and Taliban were making a furiously desperate last stand there — including, some said, bin Laden. The Pakistani army blocked Taliban escapees at their border. A deal had been cut with several Afghan tribal elders to help. But, it is believed, on or around Dec. 16, about a dozen men rode mules into Pakistan through Parachinar, a 20-mile wide finger of territory that juts into Pakistan. The U.S. won its battle against the Taliban, but the main prize slipped away. With bin Laden’s escape, the war in Afghanistan had no Hollywood ending. Nevertheless, its effects will echo through history.

On Feb. 5, 2002, after major hostilities in Afghanistan, a group of about 25 men gathered outside Gardez, Afghanistan, about 40 miles from Pakistan. It was extremely cold, but these were hard men, representing three different special forces units and three CIA paramilitary teams. Although none wore uniform, they were conducting a ceremony of sorts. They kneeled or stood. Behind them was the helicopter that had brought them there, along with an American flag that had been thrust into Afghani soil. At their feet was a pile of rocks set in the pattern of a tombstone. Below the rocks, the men had buried a piece of World Trade Center debris. One recited a prayer and added, “We consecrate this spot as an everlasting memorial to the brave Americans who died on Sept. 11, so that all who would seek to do her harm will know that America will not stand by and watch terror prevail. We will export death and violence to the four corners of the earth in defense of our great nation.”

About The Author

You almost can’t mention the name Bob Woodward without thinking of Watergate, but as assistant managing editor of *The Washington Post*, his career also covers more than 30 years and eight number one national nonfiction best-sellers. His focus has spanned the Supreme Court, the Hollywood drug culture, the CIA and the Pentagon. Woodward lives in Washington, D.C., with his wife, Elsa Walsh, a writer for *The New Yorker*, and his two daughters.

Buzz-Words

Human-sourced intelligence (HUMINT) / Commander in Chief (CINC) / Combat search and rescue (CSAR)